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Profile of Rooming House Residents

INTRODUCTION

Rooming houses, one of the most inexpensive types of housing in most cities, play an important role in addressing the housing needs of very low-income single people. This study had three main objectives.

1. Create a profile of rooming house residents in three cities.
2. Assess residents' views about the affordability and quality of rooming houses.
3. Determine whether residents consider rooming houses as temporary or permanent housing.

METHODOLOGY

The study included two phases. In the first one, researchers reviewed literature about rooming houses and residents of rooming houses. Most of the literature reviewed was Canadian. This review produced a working definition of a rooming house, which the researchers used to gather the research sample:

> A "rooming house" is a permanent form of housing that consists of a building, or part of a building, where living accommodation is provided in at least four, separate, habitable rooms, each of which may contain limited food-preparation facilities or sanitary facilities, but not both.

In the second phase, researchers interviewed 240 rooming house residents—80 in Vancouver, 80 in Ottawa and 80 in Montréal—and a small number of landlords in each city. The researchers chose those three cities because each has a unique rooming house history.

Two recent studies on rooming houses—one in Toronto and the other in Winnipeg[1]—also provided information about rooming house residents and the quality of rooming houses in Canada.

GENERAL APPROACH

The key components of the fieldwork were:

- local advisory committees to facilitate the research and help interpret the results;
- peer interviewers, where appropriate, to help with tenant interviews;
- an honorarium to encourage residents to respond to the survey;
- a standardized tenant questionnaire;
- an over-sampling of female tenants for comparison purposes;
- including as many unlicensed rooming houses and rooming houses outside downtown cores as possible, as little is known about them; and
- workshops with experts and stakeholders in each city to validate and interpret the results.

[1] Distasio, J. Dudley, M., Maunder, M. (2002) *Out of the Long Dark Hallway: Voices from Winnipeg's Rooming Houses*. Institute of Urban Studies; Hwang, S., Martin, R., Hulchanski, D., Tolomiczenko, G. (2003) *Rooming House Residents: Challenging the Stereotypes*. Research Bulletin no.16, Centre for Urban and Community Studies. University of Toronto

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STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The study was exploratory, community-driven and used a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. As a result, it has both inherent strengths and limitations.

Using a standardized tenant survey that included questions from other studies allowed the researchers to compare results. Bringing stakeholders together in each city to help design the research, to help implement the research and to discuss the results, encouraged constructive dialogue, brainstorming about solutions and setting out next steps. Because the research was community-led, the approach was customized to each city.

Since there were no complete lists of rooming houses from which to randomly select buildings, the researchers drew "samples of convenience" in each city. This means there are some limitations on the research results. The samples may not be truly representative of the rooming house residents population; as well, they may or may not reflect the range and characteristics of rooming houses. Validation workshops with stakeholders during analysis of the results partially compensates for these sampling limitations; however, readers are cautioned not to generalize the results beyond the boundaries of this research.

RESULTS

The results of this study and of the recent ones conducted in Winnipeg and Toronto are remarkably similar.

Profile of rooming house residents

The typical rooming house resident in Canada is likely to be:

- a single or divorced Canadian-born male
- of British, francophone (in Montréal) or First Nations ancestry
- in his late 30s to late 40s
- living well below the poverty line.

In many cases, he is unable to work because of poor physical or mental health or addictions. In other cases, he will be recovering from ill health, substance abuse or other disruptive life circumstances and will be trying to re-enter the mainstream of society by looking for work, volunteering his time, or working.

Many students (including foreign students) appear to be turning to rooming houses as an alternative to more expensive on-campus housing. Recent immigrants to Canada are also using rooming houses as they settle into a new location. In a few instances, individuals who can afford other forms of housing choose to live in a rooming house because they do not want the responsibility of a larger home.

A small and steady proportion of women live in rooming houses. Their profile is much the same as for men. However, this study and others show that some rooming houses are problematic for women—particularly for those with multiple health and social needs. This subject needs further study.

THE AFFORDABILITY AND QUALITY OF ROOMING HOUSES

Although it may appear that rooming houses are an affordable housing option for low-income people, the study found that most tenants pay more than they can afford on rent. Many rooming house residents use food banks. Some earn money by dumpster diving, panhandling or involvement in illicit activities.

At the same time, landlords report being unable to cover their costs and said not being able to raise rents is a major issue.

Most tenants appear to be satisfied with their accommodation, particularly those living in smaller rooming houses, those living in rooming houses with responsive landlords or those who have social supports, such as friendships with other residents.

Tenants who were dissatisfied with their accommodation sometimes blamed landlords for not responding quickly enough to problems. In other cases, both landlords and tenants blamed the disruptive behaviours of certain tenants as the main cause of problems.

The study uncovered a number of issues affecting the quality of life and health of tenants. Perhaps the most compelling was the large number of people sharing bathrooms in some of the larger rooming houses. There is a clear correlation between this overcrowding and the reported poor state of repair of the bathrooms in many rooming houses.

Both landlords and tenants identified a need for more support, either on-site or through linkages with community agencies, for tenants with mental health or addictions issues. Landlords reported that people with mental illness and addictions seem to be an increasing proportion of rooming house residents.

Both tenants and landlords identified the lack of accessibility for aging tenants or younger persons with physical disabilities as an issue.

ARE ROOMING HOUSES TEMPORARY OR PERMANENT ACCOMMODATION?

The study found that most rooming house residents viewed their tenancy as temporary. Students or young people trying to get an independent start in life often lived in a rooming house less than a year or two.

About one third of the residents interviewed called their current place home and saw their rooming house as long-term accommodation. Experts consulted during the results workshops felt that good quality rooming houses could be a feasible housing choice for low-income, single people either as a temporary or longer-term arrangement.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESULTS

The results workshops held to review the survey outcomes for each city brought together a range of stakeholders, including rooming house tenants, private and non-profit landlords, city housing officials and community support agency staff. In spite of differing perspectives, there was consensus around the following issues.

- There appears to be a widening gap between what tenants can afford to pay for a room and the cost of operating a rooming house.
- Economic pressures, such as the aging of the building stock and the rising cost of utilities, operations and general maintenance, could threaten the sustainability of the rooming house sector because other investment options are becoming more attractive to landlords.
- As the population ages, so will rooming house residents age—making the need for "supportive housing" more pressing.
- *Good quality* rooming houses can play a role in the array of housing options for low-income people and those who choose this form of housing for lifestyle reasons.
- There is growing pressure on cities to further regulate rooming houses and enforce violations to ensure properties are properly maintained. At the same time, there is a danger that regulatory requirements will drive both good and bad landlords out of the business as a result of the increasing cost of meeting such requirements.
- There is a need for different government sectors to work together to maintain or increase the affordability of rooming houses.

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Housing Research at CMHC

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